HOTEL ST. BENEDICT FLATS
40-50 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
November, 1985

Revised February, 1986

HOTEL ST. BENEDICT FLATS
40-50 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: James J. Egan

Builder/Contractor: Patrick J. Sexton

Date of Construction: 1882-1883

The Hotel St. Benedict Flats, built in 1882-1883 at 40 East Chicago Avenue, survives from an era when this part of the Near North Side was predominately residential, composed of large, single-family houses sited on spacious landscaped plots along quiet, tree-shaded streets and interspersed with the newer apartment buildings. The Hotel St. Benedict Flats was one of the latter whose developer, Patrick J. Sexton, was wisely capitalizing on a burgeoning trend toward multi-family dwellings. The building was noted in the real estate section of the *Chicago Tribune* on May 20, 1883:

> P. J. Sexton leased in September, of the Benedictine order, 162 x 152 feet on the corner of Cass [now Wabash Avenue] street and Chicago avenue, the old St. Joseph's church lot with an option to purchase. He built upon the lot a row of exceptionally fine flats containing thirty-six apartments at an outlay of $90,000.

As the newspaper noted, the new apartment complex was sited on land originally occupied by one of the city's first churches. In the 1860s, the Benedictines of St. Vincent Abbey, a Roman Catholic order from Latrobe, Pennsylvania, came to Chicago at the invitation of Bishop James Duggan to establish the parish of St. Joseph. Under the leadership of the Rev. Louis Fink, OSB, a large brick church was erected at the northeast corner of Chicago Avenue and Cass Street. The church was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871. Although the Benedictines then relinquished the land, their name remained associated with it as the *Chicago Inter Ocean* explained in its real estate news for May 20, 1883:

> T. J. Kinsella sold the corner of Chicago avenue and Cass street for the Benedictine order, to P. J. Sexton, the ground being 180 x 150 feet, and the price

> paid $30,000. On this property, Mr. Sexton has already built a most imposing set of flats, to which now has been given the name Hotel St. Benedict in memory of that great saint whose seventh centennial anniversary was celebrated the past year.

Rather than choose a more secular title to christen his new business enterprise, Mr. Sexton's Irish-Catholic heritage may have led him to preserve the memory of the first occupants of the site and the illustrious founder of their religious order in the name of his new building.

The Builder of the Hotel St. Benedict Flats and its Architect

In the case of the Hotel St. Benedict Flats, the name of the developer and the architect are both known. This is most unusual for such a vintage building. The developer of the structure was a prominent Chicago contractor, Patrick J. Sexton, who was born in County Cavan, Ireland in 1848. He came to America with his parents at the age of four, and the family settled in Cincinnati. During the Civil War he served in a company of Kentucky cavalry, and he arrived in Chicago from Nashville, Tennessee shortly after the great fire. Here he became identified with the building industry and at the time of his death on October 28, 1903, he was president of the Chicago Brick Company. His obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* observed that he was "a well-known and wealthy contractor" and that:

> Among the best known structures which he erected are the Cook County hospital, the city hall, the county building, and the Plymouth Congregational Church. He was also interested in the construction of several of the world's fair buildings. He was a pioneer of brick manufacture in Illinois.

He died in his home at 1340 South Michigan Avenue, six seeks after becoming ill on a trip to London. He was buried at Calvary Cemetery in Evanston in a mausoleum designed in 1883 by James J. Egan, architect for the Hotel St. Benedict Flats.

Most noted as an early ecclesiastical architect in the Midwest, James J. Egan was born in 1839 in Cork, Ireland where he was educated at Queen's College and the Government School of Design. Arriving in New York in 1866, he received architectural training in the offices of James Duckworth and Richard Upjohn, both specialists in church design. He came to Chicago in 1871 and established a solid professional reputation in the time of reconstruction following the Great Fire. A number of his most substantial commissions came from the Catholic Archdiocese. These include St. Vincent de Paul Church (1895-97) and Holy Angels Church (1896-97). Another notable building is the De LaSalle Institute, opened in 1892. The Egan portion of the school was demolished in 1984, but the churches are still standing. Joined by Charles H. Prindeville in 1897, the newly established firm of Egan and Prindeville designed St. Agatha Church (1904-06), St. Bridget Church (1905-06), St. Andrew Church (1912-13), and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church (1913-14). Mr. Egan's name is also associated with a number of secular structures. Among the most noted are the 1874 Criminal Court and City Jail (the former was replaced in 1892 by the existing building at 54 W. Hubbard Street), and the 1885

City Hall and County Building for which Patrick J. Sexton was a contractor. Although these buildings have long since been demolished and replaced, at the time they were obviously conspicuous and important commissions assigned only to an architect of considerable stature. Besides the Hotel St. Benedict Flats, Mr. Egan also designed the Hotel Breevort in Chicago, Hotel Ryan in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Spaulding Hotel in Duluth, Minnesota. James J. Egan died on December 2, 1914. Like Patrick J. Sexton, he is buried at Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois for which he had designed a Gothic entrance gate in 1883.

The lives and careers of both Patrick J. Sexton and James J. Egan together exemplify one of Chicago's richest ethnic traditions, that of the Irish Catholics. As noted by Holli and Jones in their 1984 book, *Ethnic Chicago*:

> Beginning as humble canal diggers and laborers, these sons of the Emerald Isle soon came to dominate the "Irish trinity" of American urban life: the priesthood, the police, and. . .politics. Every Chicago bishop from 1847 to 1916 with one exception was Irish, the police force was disproportionately Irish by the 1890s; and every mayor of Chicago since 1933 with two exceptions has been of Irish heritage. . .With the language of "perfidious Albion" and a goodly store of native wit, the Irish went on to conquer the American city, introducing and leading their often less fortunate co-religionists from Europe to the American mainstream.

The role of the Irish in Chicago's history is both important and pronounced, and the contribution of these early immigrants to the growth of the city has been documented many times over.

The Near North Side

Of all of Chicago's dynamic retail thoroughfares, North Michigan Avenue most closely approximates the kind of elegant and expensive street that is almost always found in the larger cosmopolitan centers. However, North Michigan Avenue as Chicagoans know it today, is a twentieth-century phenomena. During the nineteenth century, North Michigan Avenue was known as Pine Street, and its environs were conspicuously residential and an enclave for a number of prominent Chicagoans. Among these was Joseph Medill, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, who lived in a brownstone at 101 Cass Street; iron and steel business mogul Joseph T. Ryerson who had his home at 615 Rush Street; and former Republican mayor Julian Rumsey, who had rebuilt on the site where his burned-out house stood at Cass and Ontario streets. Railroad capitalist and lawyer Perry H. Smith resided in a palatial white marble mansion at the northwest corner of Huron and Pine streets, and Cyrus McCormick of reaper fame had a late Renaissance brownstone at 675 Rush Street with numerous of his relatives nearby in equally elaborate dwellings. In his book *Old Chicago Houses*, John Drury describes the neighborhood as it was then:

> What Prairie Avenue was to the South Side of Chicago, Pine Street was to the

> North Side. On both sides of Pine Street . . . in the years after the Chicago Fire stood many fine homes where lived a group of old and socially prominent families. Among these were the Pooles, Leiters, Ryersons, McCormicks, Carpenters, Trees, Blairs, Medills, and Rumseys. They occupied residences on Pine Street and other streets adjoining the Old Chicago Water Tower. . .These were the days of gas lamps, hourglass figures, family albums, top hats, and gold-headed canes.

Thus the Hotel St. Benedict Flats was built in one of Chicago's most desirable and pre-eminent residential neighborhoods.

Flat Buildings in Chicago

Historians generally refer to the "golden age" of Chicago flats as the period from the turn-of-the-century up to the First World War. However, the prelude to this was set in the important years 1871 to 1893 which saw the first generation of Chicago flat and apartment building. During these two decades, the city grew with breathtaking rapidity, as historian Bessie Louise Pierce noted in *A History of Chicago* (1957):

> During this period Chicago achieved maturity and assumed a leadership befitting the second largest city in the country. . . .The years 1871-1893 were the most crowded and dynamic the city had known.

Indeed, by the 1880s, a so-called "flat fever" had taken hold of Chicago and the year 1883 alone saw the construction of over 1100 flat buildings. All were given a name to enhance their respectability, emulating the custom in France where apartment living had been accepted for many years. A list culled from the 1891 book *Industrial Chicago* illustrates the breadth and variety of appellations:

> Then followed others: The Calumet, Beaurivage, Belvidere, Benton, Cambridge, Charlevoix, Dakota, Hotel de Lincoln, Hotel Rutland, Hotel Vendome, Geneva, Houghton, Ingleside, Ivanhoe, Ivar, Kenilworth, LaFayette, LaSalle, Locust, Marquette, Morton, Ontario, Palermo, Prairie, St. Benedict, Seville, Victoria, Oakland and Coronado and Ramona, all sprung up as if by magic, and a thousand less notable stone-faced, pressed brick structures. . .appeared throughout the city, taking the place of ancient frame or brick houses or of ruins.

While it is true that the Hotel St. Benedict Flats was built during a phase of "flat fever", it undoubtedly was one of the best and finest examples of this new kind of building as the *Chicago Inter Ocean* noted in 1883:

> Perhaps the largest flat on the North Side is the one rising at the corner of Chicago avenue and Cass street [Wabash Avenue], covering 163 feet on the avenue and 154 feet on the street. There is a high basement and four stories.

> The material is Bedford stone in the first floor, and the walls are of pressed brick. There are polished granite columns with carved capitals at the entrance; and throughout the building is furnished with the highest order of completeness. The cost will not fall below $90,000. Sexton et al are owners and builders.

The fact that some were called hotels does not necessarily indicate that they actually functioned as transient quarters. Rather, this reveals a curious facet of Chicago real estate practice. A statute, passed in Illinois in 1872, forbade the formation of corporations with no other purpose than the buying and improving of land. This prevented the builder from enjoying the limited liability that a corporation offered. Crafty Chicagoans circumvented this onerous law by forming corporations for the ostensible purpose of building and running a hotel but in actual practice they operated an apartment building. In addition, apartment building owners, with an eye toward the World's Columbian Exposition opening in 1893, may have envisioned opportunities to provide temporary housing for visitors to the fair.

The Apartment Building in the History of Urban Housing

The apartment building came to the fore in American architectural history in the last several decades of the nineteenth century. However, its acceptance as an alternative to the single-family home was not immediate and, indeed, was often fraught with controversy as Gwendolyn Wright points out in *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (1981):

> The early instances of journalistic debate about urban multifamily living for Americans--already encompassing fears about communism and promiscuity, but also a fascination with the possibilities for efficiency, cooperation, and good financial investments--frequently concerned apartments. . .All in all, at least for several decades, the middle-class public was highly ambivalent--suspicious but enthusiastic--about the potential of the apartment building as a means of reorganizing certain aspects of American domesticity.

One of the most cherished convictions of the Victorians was the sanctity of the family, and it was commonly thought that this ideal could only be achieved within the confines of the single-family home. Integral to the maintenance of privacy and nurturing of individuality was the detached, free-standing dwelling enclosed by a protecting fence and surrounded by lawn, flowers, and trees. Late nineteenth-century critics considered the apartment or flat building as a serious threat to the stability of family life. This idea was certainly prevalent in Chicago as this editorial from the *Chicago Tribune* of 1881 reveals:

> The tenement-house system in New York is rapidly expanding among the people of comfortable means. In former years only the poor lived in layers but now French flats are habituating well-to-do people in the same kind of life. . .It is impossible that a population living in sardine boxes should have

> either the physical or moral vigor of people who have door-yards of their own. For exceptional cases of old people without children, bachelors and transitory tenants, French flats are admirable, but as a general proposition Chicago wants no tenement houses for rich or poor.

Gradually, however, the flat or apartment building gained favor, even popularity, as an acceptable form of housing. As the multi-story office block developed to answer the needs of the crowded central commercial area, the apartment building developed in response to the residential requirements of the rapidly expanding urban population. In the 1891 *Industrial Chicago*, the authors offered this social commentary on the new building phenomenon:

> The reverses of 1871 banished the idea of a permanent home from many hearts and the speculators, knowing the tendency of the public mind, prepared to provide for it. The flat was to take the place of the small house by grouping ten, twenty, thirty or forty small houses under one roof, gathering so many families together, and working out in a measure a social problem of no small importance. What if the flat would destroy home life? Who would take the trouble of a home and servants and taxes and neighbor's hens and children and cows in the presence of the flat? No one. The same elevators, the same servants, the same steam, and the same light are as much at the call of the tenants of No. 40 flat as they are of those of No. 1 and the total expense is a known quantity. Who cared for the status and independence of home compared with the sweets and deceptions of the French flat.

The term "French flat" refers not to any particular style but rather to the actual origin of this type of dwelling in Europe. During the latter years of the nineteenth century, Americans believed the best architectural education could only be obtained in Europe, particularly at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Americans who studied abroad brought back not only a rich vocabulary of classical styles and a thorough grounding in the methods of composition but also a familiarity with the building types they had seen in Paris. One of these was most certainly the apartment building which for many years had been a commonplace habitation for wealthy upper-class Parisian families. In fact, the first American to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Richard Morris Hunt, also designed the first apartment building in New York City in 1869.

Because the early flat buildings in America enjoyed dubious credentials as domestic substitutes for houses, they were at first disguised as houses, as architectural historian Carroll William Westfall noted in his November 1980 article in *Inland Architect* on "The Golden Age of Chicago Apartments:"

> Whatever made a multifamily residence look like a house and a home was stressed, and whatever gave the appearance of pretense and of an apartment building or of a "French flat" was suppressed.

This was certainly true of the Hotel St. Benedict Flats which features four principal entrances and, indeed, its total configuration resembles nothing less than four separate houses banded

together. In Rascher's Insurance Atlas of 1892, the St. Benedict is even drawn and described as four separate party-wall structures. Architecturally, the early flat buildings aped the styles that the wealthy were then choosing for their own homes. Particularly prevalent during the the 1880s and 1890s were the Queen Anne, the Gothic, and the Romanesque.

The Hotel St. Benedict Flats in Architectural History

The Hotel St. Benedict Flats most aptly fits within Victorian Gothic Style, prevalent in the United States from approximately 1860 to 1890. The most distinguishing feature of this style is created by the juxtaposition of materials of differing colors and textures. The Hotel St. Benedict Flats sits on a base of rusticated cream-colored stone which contrasts with the smooth warm red brick finish of the exterior walls which in turn contrasts with the shiny black slate tiles of the roof. Dormers with steeply pitched gables are set into a mansard roof, making an especially strong roofline silhouette in the Second Empire style. Special decorative attention has been concentrated on the entryways, framed with slender polished stone columns crowned with foliated capitals. Delicate incised stone carvings in floral and geometric patterns ornament the entablature, the cornice and the porch above each entrance. The same type of restrained decorative scheme has been applied to the lintels above every window, most of which have stained-glass transoms. In overall size and scale, the Hotel St. Benedict Flats was carefully crafted to meld into the nineteenth-century residential cityscape.

Only a handful of the early 1880s apartment buildings are still extant in the city, particularly among those built on the Near North and Near South sides, then considered the most affluent, fashionable, and sought-after residential neighborhoods. The Chicago Historic Resources Survey did not find any surviving examples of this building type in the 2nd Ward, and in its preliminary survey of the 42nd Ward, the survey has found only one building somewhat comparable to the Hotel St. Benedict Flats. This is the four-story Calumet Flats of 1882-83, located at 53-55 W. Erie Street. However, this building does not approach the substantial size or sophistication in concept and design of the Hotel St. Benedict Flats. Handsome and imposing, the Hotel St. Benedict Flats is the best surviving example of its type.

Until recently historians who studied Chicago architecture primarily focused either on commercial buildings or unique residential structures. However, this emphasis has been gradually changing as increasing attention is given to the more typical forms of housing that daily affected ordinary people, as architectural historian Wim de Wit noted in his article, "Apartment Houses and Bungalows: Building the Flat City," in the Winter 1983-84 issue of *Chicago History*:

> Studies of commercial buildings and unique residential architecture gives us insight into how an architect thinks and what theoretical and aesthetic concerns motivate him, but they provide only a partial picture of what architecture means to our society. To understand its full meaning we have to turn to the popular forms of architecture--the apartment, the flat, and the bungalow--that the majority of Americans choose for their homes. These forms tell us

not only about the kind of architecture people choose to live in, but unlike commercial architecture, they also explain a great deal about the kinds of lives people want to lead.

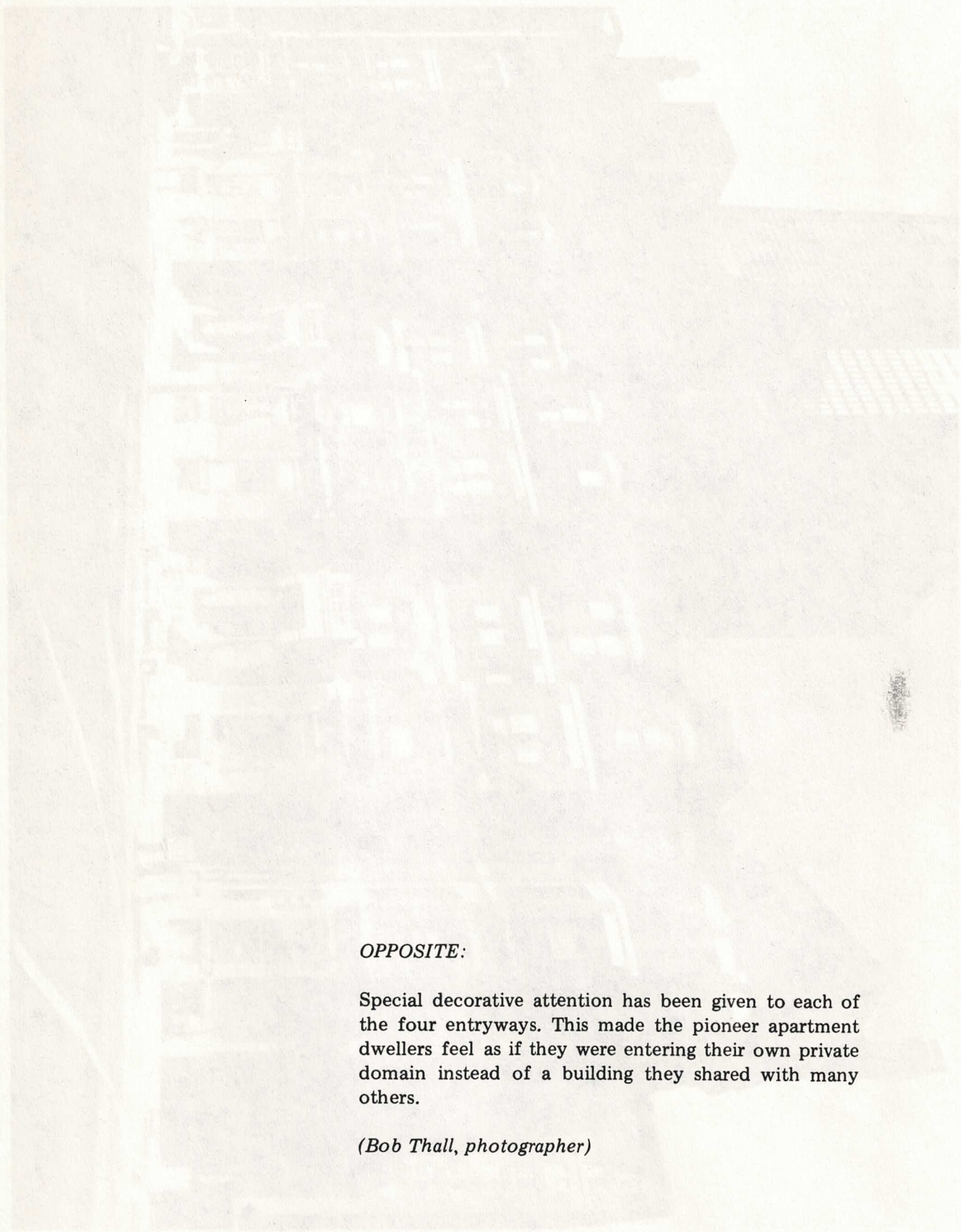
This kind of enlightened historical and architectural perspective encourages a new appreciation and awareness of buildings such as the Hotel St. Benedict Flats.

OPPOSITE:

Substantial and solidly built, the Hotel St. Benedict Flats has occupied the corner of Wabash and Chicago avenues for over one hundred years.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

COFFEE
LOYOLA



OPPOSITE:

Special decorative attention has been given to each of the four entryways. This made the pioneer apartment dwellers feel as if they were entering their own private domain instead of a building they shared with many others.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

COPY CENTER

OPPOSITE:

Steeply pitched gable dormers create an imposing roofline silhouette.

(Bob Thall, photographer)

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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